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Sergei Prozorov

POWERS OF LIFE AND DEATH: BIOPOLITICS BEYOND FOUCAULT

Editor's Introduction

The problematic of biopolitics has become increasingly important in the social sciences. Starting from Michel Foucault's genealogies of governance of sexuality, crime and mental illness in modern Europe, which marked the shift from negative and repressive techniques of sovereign power towards the positive and productive power over life, the research on biopolitics has developed into a wider interdisciplinary orientation, addressing the rationalities of power over living beings in diverse spatial and temporal contexts.

While biopolitics is conventionally understood as positive and productive, numerous studies of biopolitics, both theoretical and empirical, suggest that this claim is by no means unproblematic. Biopolitics is inherently paradoxical, in that its ambition to 'make live', to foster, augment and optimize life, remains intertwined with its apparent opposite, the negative power of exclusion and annihilation. While this conversion of biopolitics into

'thanatopolitics' was noted already in Foucault's *History of Sexuality I*, its full implications have been elaborated in the more recent theories of Giorgio Agamben, Roberto Esposito and other authors. These studies demonstrate that the association of the positive power over life with the negative power of death is hardly coincidental but rather lies at the heart of the biopolitical project. While the interpretations of this conjunction of the powers of life and death are certainly diverse and resort to ontological, anthropological, historical and ideological arguments, they clearly demonstrate that the problematic of biopolitics may no longer be viewed in terms of a simple temporal succession from the dark age of sovereign negativity to the glorious age of positive power that makes life live. Bio-power, however we define it, is always already a power of life *and* death, not only in the sense that fostering the life of some presupposes the death of others, but also in the more ominous sense that the life fostered, amplified and optimized in biopolitical practices remains in proximity to death precisely by virtue of being enfolded in an apparatus of power, whose biopolitical productivity does not exclude sovereign negativity.

This understanding of biopolitics introduces a range of problems for critical research. Insofar as it is no longer meaningful to simply oppose biopower to sovereignty as the positive to the negative, what does the task of critique consist in? Is it a matter of attempting to dissociate the powers of life and death, to free biopolitics from its constituent negativity? What does it mean to speak of a 'positive' or 'affirmative' biopolitics given the intertwining of the powers of life and death? *Can* biopolitics be affirmative, unless what one affirms in it is precisely death itself? Alternatively, if a biopolitics without negativity and death is impossible, should criticism aim at exiting the biopolitical terrain as such? Yet, if this terrain now embraces life

as such, spilling over into all possible domains of existence, where exactly would an exit from biopolitics take us?

This Special Issue ventures to begin to respond to this challenge by reconsidering the relation between bio- and thanato-politics through theoretical and empirical investigations of their paradoxical entanglement. This set of articles is based on the papers originally presented at the conference 'Powers of Life and Death', funded by the Academy of Finland, that I organized at the University of Helsinki in November 2012. This conference brought together scholars with highly diverse disciplinary backgrounds and approaches to biopolitics. The intention was to avoid starting from any particular definition or approach to biopolitics and instead take up the problem of the thanatopolitical conversion at the most different sites imaginable: Socratic ethics, socialist revolution and AIDS prevention, to name just a few. Despite this diversity, the papers presented here share a strong theoretical conviction about the impossibility of separating the positive and negative aspects of biopolitics, the persistence of the thanatopolitical even in the contexts we are most accustomed to associate with the affirmation and care of life and the consequent need to problematize our familiar assumptions about the relation of politics to life.

The Issue opens with Mika Ojakangas's genealogy of the Western biopolitical subject. Sharing Agamben's insistence on the ancient origins of biopolitics, Ojakangas nonetheless contests Agamben's famous presentation of the originary figure of the biopolitical subject as *homo sacer*, a human being that can be killed with impunity. He argues that the paradigm of such a subject is rather best sought in the Socratic figure of *erēmos aporos*, an abandoned and forlorn being that dwells as a refugee in his own city, not because of being excluded by

others but as a result of his *self*-exclusion in response to the voice of his conscience. Yet, while the Socratic subject of conscience is seemingly a less ominous figure than *homo sacer*, this mode of subjectivity remains directly and immediately thanatopolitical, albeit in the sense of 'symbolic death' or social suicide. It is by risking symbolic death by following only the call of one's conscience and excluding oneself from the polis that the Socratic subject is able to assume sovereignty over his bare life. The figures of sovereign and *homo sacer* that were symmetrical in Agamben's argument thus end up fused into a single figure of a 'sovereign *homo sacer*', a being that dominates its own bare life, but only at the price of negating it.

Prozorov's article addresses the fundamental paradox of biopolitics in the context of the Stalinist period of Soviet history. Despite the omission of the case of Stalinism from the studies of biopolitics, this phenomenon is a particularly powerful example of the thanatopolitical conversion of biopolitics due to its combination of an extremely ambitious programme of the positive transformation of almost every aspect of human existence in accordance with the Marxist ideology and an equally extremely violent project of the negation of the very same lives that were to be positively transformed. Through a systematic comparison of the Stalinist biopolitical rationality with both liberal and Nazi governmentalities, we arrive at the formulation of the Stalinist project in terms of the conjunction of the immanentist transformation of lived reality, characteristic of all biopolitics, and the revolutionary-messianic drive for the transcendence of reality as it is. While both liberalism and Nazism could be conceived as 'immunitary' projects of securing and protecting life, albeit negatively and violently, the Stalinist project of the construction of socialism as a lived reality may be grasped as counter-immunitary, forcing the idea of

socialism into the real by forcing out those aspects of the real that conflict with it, abandoning any concern with security or protection. The article traces this paradoxical and paroxysmal logic in an empirical analysis of the period of the Great Break (1928-1932), marked by the most intense thanatopolitical violence and the subsequent partial negation of this project under High Stalinism.

Repo's contribution addresses a key transformation in the biopolitical rationality of the 20th century, the invention of gender as a mechanism of the biopolitical control of the body. With the emergence of the category of gender, sexuality was no longer determined either biologically or psychologically but rather reinterpreted in terms of gender roles, effects of socialization into normative behavioral patterns. While the abandonment of biological determinism may at first glance appear to be emancipatory, Repo demonstrates how it is precisely the understanding of gender as a 'social construct' that provided new mechanisms for disciplining sexual behaviors. While following Foucault's precepts about the positivity and productivity of power, Repo also traces the negative or even thanatopolitical aspects of the production of gender, focusing specifically on the case of the hermaphrodite child, whose 'ambiguous genitalia' led to violent interventions of sex reassignment that sought to bring the materiality of the body in accordance with the gender role that the subject was to be socialized into. The social construction of gender was thereby supplemented with a physical reconstruction of bodies.

Lindberg's article locates the philosophical debates on bio- and thanatopolitics in the context of the governance of organ donation. Focusing on the recent amendment of the law on organ donation in Finland, she traces the way this apparently minor legislative change

leads to a fundamental reconstitution of the very notions of life and death. The paradigm of the brain-dead body that becomes the source of the paradoxically obligatory gift of organs and hence of life is impossible to subsume under either a positive theory of biopolitics of a Deleuzian or Negrian kind or a negative reading of the kind practiced by Agamben or Esposito. The negativity of the decision on death coexists in this case with the affirmation of life for the beneficiaries of the donation and this bipolar tension is not resolved in any synthesis. The article concludes with a reflection on the startling implications of this coexistence for our understanding of political community: while we are more accustomed to think of politics in terms of common praxis on the basis of the living substrate that remains individual or private, contemporary bio/thanatopolitical innovations rather point to a community of individuals that holds in common precisely this living substrate itself.

Finally, Ailio's article traces the operation of the thanatopolitical logic in liberal governmentality. While numerous empirical studies of liberal biopolitics highlighted its recourse to violent and lethal measures, theory of biopolitics tended to dissociate liberalism from the thanatopolitical dimension, whereby liberalism was viewed as only resorting to the power of death as an exception to or betrayal of liberal maxims themselves. In his article Ailio relies on Esposito's account of the immunitary logic of biopolitics and his genealogy of the apparatus of the 'person' to articulate an outline of a specifically liberal thanatopolitics: a politics that produces death not despite but because of its commitment to liberal maxims. He demonstrates the operation of this logic in the contemporary global governance of the AIDS pandemic, which, while ostensibly and increasingly grounded in the precepts of liberal governmentality, abandons AIDS victims to death, precisely as a result of its operation with the liberal understanding of the person in terms of the subject's control and domination of

the simply living being within him- or herself. Ailio's analysis challenges the optimistic accounts of the shift of the governance of the AIDS pandemic towards liberal rights-based principles, demonstrating the way the dehumanizing effects of the disease are only aggravated by the humanist presuppositions of liberal governance.